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CHARLES WRIGHT AND THE WATTS 103RD STREET RHYTHM BAND

Sometimes you wonder what a name means ... and every now and then, if you're lucky, you find out. There are Caucasians in the Watts Band, and it seems incongruous for a group with a name that means "I'm Black." So you walk up and ask them ... "Say, man, are you in the group? I heard all you guys were black."

"We are, man."

That's where it's at. The Watts Band has been together for three years and has lost only one man. He was not replaced. Ask any musician how easy it is to keep an ordinary group together for that long ... ask any rhythm and blues musician what the chances are for holding an eight-man band together without a constant income from steady hits ...

Fact is, the Watts Band is no ordinary group. Listen to Charles Wright speaking. "People at one time said we were trying to make it on the name of Watts, but I think they realize now that it hurts us more than it helps us. Every time we turn around, there's that name, and we don't dare cop out."

Charles is the leader of the band. "I suppose we could go totally commercial, turn out more rock music, or do other people's styles, but that would be like stealing. Almost all the good commercial music out now has its roots in the old blues and rhythm 'n' blues. Black music, so why should we do variations of our own music when we've got the original right here? We'll improve it our own way."

Charles Wright formed the band after a long trek upward through the ranks of rhythm 'n' blues. He sang with the Gallahads, ("Lonely Guy" and "I'm Without a Girlfriend") and produced Little Caesar and the Romans ... ("Those Oldies but Goodies Remind Me of You") .... and sang a monster hit in words you'll still remember if you were around then. "You cheated, you lied, you said that you loved me ..." Remember?

Originally the band was called Charles Wright and the Wright Sounds. Friend Bill Cosby suggested a change, and they became the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band, simply because that was where they lived. Some of them still do.

"See, we want to <u>say</u> something, we want to talk in our words and sing <u>our</u> music .... which is <u>happy</u> music, it's real, it's emotional ... and we must get across to people.

"I listen to all kinds of music. At night, sometimes there's nothing on the tube, so I turn on the radio, and if Joe Pyne's on I just switch over to the classical music. And I get <u>into</u> classical music. I think there's just as much soul there as there is in rock or R&B. I think a <u>good</u> conductor must be half-insane with ... whatever it is ... joy ... when he gets a good orchestra under him and he can turn out beautiful music.

"But you can't reach people with that anymore. It's old, it's become a plaything for intellectuals. All the people in the street just walk by 'cause the intellectuals have made it their bag, see, and it's not natural any more.

"I like the Stones and the Beatles, and they reach people. They're natural, but they'll tell you, if you ask them, where their roots are. And we're playing those roots."

Besides being their leader, Wright contributes most of the material to the group's repertoire, produces all recording sessions ... and maintains the morale factor.

"Funny thing is, any other group in R&B would have given up before we did ... in R&B, if you don't get steady hits, everything goes down the tubes. But we managed to stay together until we got it started.

"Commerciality only cheapens a product, no matter how good it is, if it's phony, people know it. When we recorded "Do Your Thing," we did it live in a club, and recorded it right there. We had never played the song before, we just jammed it and I came up with words on the spot. When we heard the tape, nobody had any faith in it except my drummer, James Gadson, and myself. But I decided to release it anyway. My best friend called me up and told me I should be ashamed of myself for putting such an unfinished product on the market. But that record made it, and made us a reputation. And I think it was because it was honest, it said what it meant and there was feeling there ... that's why it sold. That's why six other groups have come out with songs just like it since then."

"Since then" the band has appeared with Sammy Davis, Jr., toured with Diana Ross and the Supremes, toured with Nina Simone, with Marvin Gaye, Bill

Cosby, Dionne Warwick ... and has just recorded its fourth album for Warner Bros. Records.

Charles plays guitar and piano. Speaking from the keyboard, he says: "Later on we want to get deeper into lyrics. Right now a lot of our message is in music .... but I have quite a few songs we haven't recorded that I want to change .... I've got a lot to say, and I want to make sure everyone understands when I say it."

Gabriel Flemings plays a hostile trumpet. Angry and opinionated, he composes music and writes lyrics, wants to establish himself as a creative individual. He believes in his music and knows the value of publicity. Everything else he doubts, pointedly, with a dark fire under his eyebrows.

Al McKay, wary of strangers, listens before he speaks. Then he bellylaughs and opens up. He plays guitar, sings, plays drums occasionally. ("Very occasionally," shouts the drummer.) He writes music, somehow managing to avoid the "bag syndrome." His melodies slide in and out of folk, rock and rhythm 'n' blues. "It all depends on the way I feel."

Ray Jackson plays trombone, writes arrangements and his own songs. "My favorite music used to be jazz, but lately it's R&B. What I want to do is raise R&B to its highest musical and cultural level .... put it on a level with classical music." He calls the Watts Band "Eight People. Music is very important to us .. to me. I get as much out of it as I can."

John Rayford pulses on tenor sax, tries to explain his music in terms anyone can understand. "Music today is going back to a feeling it used to have ... we mix blues and jazz, we're trying to get our own sound, be recognized. It's hard to put what we're trying to do into words. It's just something I hear."

Melvin Dunlap, extremely reserved and polite, deliberate offstage, waits until he is plugged in.... then he slaps you across the mind with his bass guitar. His hands are like butterflies walking on steel wires, rhythmic and syncopated as an Indian pony tap-dancing on a xylophone. "We express ourselves to the public.... there are a lot of us, a lot of different personalities, but we all think alike musically ... that explains the way we play."

Bill Cannon, tenor saxophone. "We're trying to play music that people can feel and dance to ... and still make it good enough for us to enjoy as musicians. We're playing with form right now, and eventually we want to free ourselves of form as a unit.... without unity, we'd have chaos. So we have to evolve slowly into a free-form group, same people, together." He sits back and breathes and you realize this is the longest speech he's made in weeks. "All our music is in our heads ..."

James Gadson plays drums. He's good. "I'm just trying to do my gig," he says. He looks at you out of old, hard eyes, and you wonder what he's thinking.

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